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Pledge of Allegiance: An Overview

Reciting the Pledge of Allegiance to the American flag has been a tradition in the United States for a little over a century. It is most commonly recited in public schools, but also by certain political bodies and at ceremonies conferring citizenship. Its purpose is to unify citizens around a symbol, the flag, which is supposed to encapsulate the country's ideals of unity, liberty, and justice, while demonstrating loyalty to the nation.

Controversy over the Pledge of Allegiance derives from several positions. One position has the issue of patriotism at its core. It argues that the educational system is responsible for teaching patriotism to students and that the pledge engenders a sense of belonging and loyalty as it prepares them to be full-fledged citizens. Some religious groups, however, refrain from saying the pledge because their first loyalty is to God rather than to a nation.

A second position is that the invocation of God in the text of the pledge currently used is a violation of the nation's commitment to the separation of church and state, as interpreted through the First Amendment. In this view, enforcing the recitation of the pledge signifies state endorsement of religion. Proponents of the pledge and its invocation of God range in their opinions, from the argument that true Americans cannot be atheists to the argument that the issue has been blown out of proportion and that mentioning God, even for non-believers, is harmless.

The Pledge of Allegiance has been the focus of numerous court cases and much public debate, and movements exist to keep the pledge in the classroom, to remove it, as well as to revise it.

Understanding the Discussion

Allegiance: Loyalty, in this case to a nation.

Atheism: The belief that no god or gods exist.

First Amendment: The First Amendment of the U.S. Constitution reads: "Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof; or abridging the freedom of speech, or of the press; or the right of the people peaceably to assemble, and to petition the government for a redress of grievances." It is one of the major reference point for arguments regarding the Pledge of Allegiance.

Pledge: A promise or an oath.

Endorse: To support; to express approval of.

Separation of Church and State: A phrase derived from the First Amendment which denotes the separation of religion and government.

History

In contemporary times, American flags are widely displayed in both public and private spaces and the Pledge of Allegiance is recited on a daily basis in many schools. Despite common perceptions to the contrary, neither tradition dates to the founding of the U.S., but rather to a movement at the end of the nineteenth century to increase patriotism and inculcate in the populace the democratic and egalitarian values of the country. These traditions have a three-fold historical context: the Civil War (1861-1865), which partly inspired the word "indivisible" in the text; the worry that capitalism promoted the selfishness of the individual over the welfare of the group; and the mass influx of immigrants who, it was thought, needed to be unified by common ideals so that they would become Americans.

The original version of the Pledge of Allegiance was penned by Francis Bellamy, a socialist and former Baptist reverend who emphasized the humanistic values in Christianity. Notably, this version did not mention God and was not initially intended to become such a defining text in the American experience. Bellamy had composed it as part of an advertising campaign for a children's periodical called "Youth's Companion," which was involved in selling American flags to schools. The campaign was later linked to the celebration of the four-hundredth anniversary of Columbus' arrival in the Americas. The pledge first appeared in "Youth's Companion" in 1892.

It did not immediately become the tradition it is today, but over time the tradition was adopted in public schools. A minor change in the 1920s made explicit that the pledge was to the U.S. rather than to another country (an immigrant's country of origin, for example). In 1942, the pledge became both more official and more codified when Congress legislated the correct procedure for reciting it: standing, with the right hand over the heart.

The pledge reached its contemporary form in 1954. At the time, the U.S. and the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (U.S.S.R.) were rivals in the Cold War. Since the U.S.S.R. was founded on atheistic principles, President Dwight Eisenhower aimed to distinguish the U.S. as a country of believers. By congressional decision, the words "under God" were added to the text.

Mandating that the pledge be recited in public schools has incited controversy from its beginning, but did not become an issue of note until War World I. Among the first and most recurrent incidences of resistance to the pledge were by religious groups, whether pacifist-oriented like the Mennonites and thus against U.S. entry into the war, or like the Jehovah's Witnesses, who refuse demonstrations of loyalty to any earthly power.

The Jehovah's Witnesses became targets for suspicion and, in some cases, violent reprisals for their

refusal to pledge allegiance to the nation. In the first landmark case, *Minersville School District vs. Gobitis* (1940), the judge ruled that the school had acted properly by expelling students who refused to recite the pledge. However, this decision was overturned three years later in *West Virginia State Board of Education vs. Barnette*, in which the Supreme Court ruled that students could not be forced to recite it.

A 1978 federal court decision, *Lipp v. Morris*, further clarified the law. It was ruled that students had the right to not stand and to remain silent during the pledge not only from religious convictions; compelling students to stand and recite the pledge was, the judge decided, a violation of free speech as granted by the First Amendment.

Debate continued over the remainder of the century, but issues like prayer in school became more predominant, for some of the same reasons. The pledge debate followed the same contours, with some arguing that the pledge trained children in patriotism, and others arguing that the pledge signified state endorsement of religion. It also became an issue of political partisanship. In 1988, Presidential candidate George H.W. Bush attacked his opponent Michael Dukakis for being unpatriotic because he had vetoed a bill mandating public school teachers to lead their classes in the pledge. Bush also expressed doubt as to whether an atheist could categorically be an American citizen, thus vouching for the centrality of the "under God" clause.

The Pledge of Allegiance Today

The controversy over the Pledge of Allegiance is particular to the U.S., since few if any other countries ask their citizens to demonstrate their loyalty through such a pledge (as opposed to a national anthem).

In recent years, the pledge has once again become the focus for debate. In 2002, the case *Elk Grove Unified School District v. Newdow* was heard by a federal appeals panel. Michael Newdow, an atheist, had brought the suit in order to challenge the recitation of the Pledge of Allegiance in his daughter's classroom, arguing that the phrase "under God" amounted to state endorsement of religion. It was not the first such legal challenge, but it was the most far-reaching. The panel found for Newdow, but a hold was placed on the ruling almost immediately and the case was appealed two years later to the Supreme Court, which threw it out on a technicality without ruling on the constitutionality of the pledge.

Dispute over the panel's decision was widespread. Proponents for keeping the pledge with the contested phrase argued that it does not specify any specific god, and that it is not obligatory to recite the pledge. Others argue that the phrase both endorses religion and coerces belief in monotheism. Still others see the debate as unimportant, arguing that the phrase even for non-believers is harmless and that focus should be placed on more vital issues.

In 2005, a bill was introduced into the Senate, known as the Pledge Protection Act. If passed, it would prevent federal courts from ruling in cases which challenge the recitation of the Pledge of Allegiance.

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